

DRUGS IN AFGHANISTAN: THE CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTING U.S. STRATEGY

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**DRUGS IN AFGHANISTAN:
THE CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTING U.S. STRATEGY**

by

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ABSTRACT

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Since 9/11 the United States has become embroiled in a fight for our values, way of life, and indeed, our future. Arguably the world's sole remaining superpower, the United States assumes a responsibility for promoting democracy and advancing freedom. In stark contrast, these western ideals have become the fuel for propelling another ideology that is based on manipulation and terror and is holding the Islamic faith hostage to advance its cause. These diametrically opposing views are certain to challenge this country for years to come, requiring our nation to carefully assess threats and judiciously apply resources against only our most dangerous enemies. Over the past six years the U.S. has committed millions of dollars and an enormous amount of the nation's capital helping Afghanistan rebuild its country and establish a freely-elected government. These successes, however, are being overshadowed by an alarming increase in the amount of illicit drugs being cultivated within Afghanistan. The effects of this rapidly escalating drug economy undermine the efforts of the fledgling Afghan government, fueling the insurgency, and threatening the security of Afghanistan and the

region. This paper reviews the U.S. counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan, examines some of its challenges, and offers recommendations to improve its effectiveness.

DRUGS IN AFGHANISTAN: THE CHALLENGES WITH IMPLEMENTING U.S. STRATEGY

A nexus between narcotics and terrorists increases the resources available to extremists...and combined with a lack of development and governance, allow Islamic extremists to turn a poisonous ideology into a global movement.

—Robert M. Gates¹

The *U.S. National Security Strategy* identifies several focus areas for achieving the overarching goal of creating a world of democratic, well-governed states by: strengthening alliances to defeat global terrorism, working with others to defuse regional conflicts, and transforming national security institutions to meet the challenges of the 21st century.² Today in Afghanistan, the United States is leveraging all instruments of power (diplomatic, information, military, economic, finance, intelligence, and law enforcement) to accomplish these tasks. As the world's sole remaining superpower, the United States assumes an inherent responsibility for promoting democracy and advancing freedom. In stark contrast, these western ideals have become the fuel for propelling another ideology, one based on manipulation and terror, which is holding the Muslim faith hostage to advance its cause. These diametrically opposing views require the United States to carefully assess threats and judiciously apply resources against its most dangerous enemies.

A recent study assessing the global geopolitical landscape through 2020 concluded that although the likelihood in the near-term for state sponsored conflict is lower than at any time in the past century, “weak governments, lagging economies, religious extremism, and youth bulges will align to create a perfect storm for internal conflict in certain regions.”³ Over the past several years, Afghanistan has been battered

by this 'perfect storm' and the effects have been devastating. Since October 2001, the United States has committed millions of dollars and precious amounts of nation's capital in helping Afghanistan rebuild its country and establish a freely-elected government. These successes, however, are being overshadowed by an alarming increase in the amount of opium poppy cultivation being produced from within Afghanistan.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Afghanistan is producing 93% of the world's illegal opium poppy and is rapidly becoming one of the world's largest producers of cannabis. "Leaving aside 19th century China, that had a population at that time 15 times larger than today's Afghanistan, no other country in the world has ever produced narcotics on such a deadly scale."⁴ Despite significant increases in counternarcotics resources, in 2007 the U. N. estimated that poppy cultivation increased by 17% and opium poppy production in Afghanistan increased by 34% over the previous year. This paper describes the root causes of these significant increases and subsequent effects. It reviews the current Afghanistan and U.S. counternarcotics strategies and offers recommendations to improve overall effectiveness.

Understanding the Environment: Looking Into the Past to See the Future

Before examining the U.S. counternarcotics strategy in Afghanistan, it is important to understand the geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions that exist in Afghanistan. Dominated by vast mountainous terrain and desert plains, Afghanistan is a landlocked country nearly the size of Texas, with a population of 31 million people. Living conditions are among the lowest in the world; estimated literacy rates vary but are generally between 28-36%.⁵ Despite the majority of the population being illiterate,

Afghans take great pride in their ability to protect their homeland. “The history of Afghanistan is replete with tales of invasion. Yet the rugged landscape combined with the fiercely independent spirit of the Afghan people have seriously impeded and often repulsed would-be conquerors.”⁶ Their success at repelling aggressors, however, has come at great cost.

Afghanistan is a war-torn country struggling to recover from three decades of conflict and bloodshed. Since the fall of the Taliban on October 7, 2001, the newly elected Afghan government has been hampered in regaining control of its country. Despite significant progress in establishing President Karzai’s government, nepotism, corruption, and inefficiency continue to plague the improvements being made. “The government’s authority is growing, although its ability to deliver necessary social services remains largely dependent on funds from the international donor community. Between 2001-2006, the United States committed over \$12 billion to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.”⁷ Having personally observed the widespread devastation throughout the country, it is accurate to say the majority of international donor funds are used to build government capacity through new construction, in that there is actually minimal infrastructure to reconstruct.

Despite the billions of dollars committed to helping Afghanistan recover from years of war, there is a growing perception among Afghans that the international community is not delivering on the promises it made. Chief among the complaints cited are: no improvement to socioeconomic conditions, corrupt and ineffective government, general lack of security, and a “growing disconnect between civil society and the national and international institutions of governance.”⁸ The combined effects of these perceptions

are causing Afghans to feel an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. It is this feeling that forces them to seek alternatives to an otherwise seemingly impossible situation. These alternatives include the increasingly popular trend of cultivating opium poppy, and using it as a commodity, which is beginning to characterize their economy, poison their culture, and impede the international community's efforts to rebuild the country.

Realities of a Drug Economy: Corruption, Desperation and Instability

While the governments of most countries represent and symbolize the fabric of its people, Afghanistan though democratic, is at risk of becoming defined by the illicit drug traffickers and insurgents who inhabit its land. Drug trafficking is becoming deeply engrained into Afghanistan's culture and society. "As the country's formal economy succumbed to violence and disorder, opium poppy cultivation expanded in parallel with the gradual collapse of state authority across Afghanistan."⁹ The causes for the rapid escalation in the drug economy can be directly attributed to the absence of an effective government, degradation in the agricultural infrastructure, and the lack of viable economic alternatives that generate a means to survive.

The degree to which corrupt Afghan government officials, police, and provincial leaders provide protection and support to the opium poppy cultivators and traffickers should not be underestimated. When considering the vast amounts of money involved and high levels of poverty, it is not surprising that Afghanistan's drug economy promotes dishonesty among state officials. This dishonesty leads to corruption which undermines the rule of law, and supports insurgents by providing them with funding necessary to conduct operations. Tragically, it is the Afghan farmers who must grow the opium poppy out of necessity, that become victims of the drug economy. "Spawned after

decades of civil and military strife, it has chained a poor rural population – farmers, landless labour, small traders, women and children - to the mercy of domestic warlords and international crime syndicates...”¹⁰

President Karzai understands the magnitude of problem and the importance of loosening the grip that the drug trade holds on Afghanistan's culture and economy. Despite his effort to increase the amount of national level support for counternarcotics operations the initiative has achieved only modest momentum. At an annual counternarcotics conference he made it abundantly clear what was at risk when he said, “As a nation, it is our duty to eradicate poppy cultivation. It only brings shame to the noble people of Afghanistan. The benefit of opium poppy production does not go to ordinary Afghans, but to international mafia groups, terrorists, and the enemies of Afghanistan. It is essential to destroy narcotics or it will destroy us.”¹¹

Unfortunately, for most of the populace there are few alternatives. Although the illicit drug trade is forbidden under Islamic law, it supplies farmers with a lucrative cash crop and a means to provide for their family. This view was confirmed during the presentation of an international general officer, who visited the U.S. Army War College and offered his perspective on coalition operations in Afghanistan. Having recently served in Afghanistan as a Regional Commander for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), he was uniquely qualified to discuss the socioeconomic conditions and operational environment within Afghanistan. Although ISAF does not conduct drug eradication operations, it does provide limited support to Afghan forces conducting these operations. In response

to a question concerning counternarcotics operations asked by this author, he replied that sixty percent of the Afghans struggle every day—just to survive.¹²

This former commander of an ISAF Regional Command is convinced the majority of farmers grow opium poppy as cash crops in order to feed their family. His central premise was if the farmer grew wheat and other food products, he would no longer need to grow illegal crops to buy food products. He added that a major grain storage facility that was recently constructed in Kandahar, Afghanistan remains empty. The local farmers do not trust the owner will be equitable in the way he manages their product and operates the facility. Without adequate storage facilities, roads to transport legal crops to market and a level of trust in the agricultural infrastructure, Afghans will continue cultivating illicit drugs.

Five years after the Karzai government declared it illegal to cultivate opium poppy or produce opium poppy, production levels reached an all time high—doubling in 2007 from what they were in 2005.¹³ By criminalizing the cultivation of opium poppy in an effort to reduce poppy production, the Karzai government has inadvertently spawned the drug economy by making it a far more profitable undertaking. That is not to say, opium poppy cultivation and drug trafficking should not be a crime. To the contrary, it merely highlights one of the causes and its subsequent, cascading effect on the drug economy in Afghanistan. The United States Government (USG) estimates that in 2006 approximately 509,000 Afghan families cultivated opium poppy, which was later sold for an estimated \$1 billion dollars (farm gate value); the U.N. estimated that total revenue from the 2006 opium poppy crop exceeded \$3 billion.¹⁴

According to the UNODC, no other agricultural product currently being grown in Afghanistan can provide comparable amounts of income.¹⁵ Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, most of the financial institutions, and in large measure the Afghan financial industry, has been in a constant state of disarray. Consequently, opium poppy evolved into a widely used source of capital to not only purchase subsistence, but also as a source of credit to obtain loans, purchase products, and recently, as a way to pay for protection from criminal or insurgent elements. Opium is also non-perishable and unlike wheat, does not have any special storage requirements; it can easily be stored for eight or more years and held until market conditions become more favorable.¹⁶

Effects of a Drug Economy: Locally, Nationally, and Regionally

If corruption and desperation are both a cause and result of Afghanistan's drug economy, what are their combined effects? In the short-term, farmers benefit from the opium poppy by using it as a cash crop to provide for their families, but the long-term effects are devastating. Drug abuse leads to addiction and high levels of opium-related debt; once caught up in this cycle of opium consumption and debt, it is very difficult to break free. It becomes equally challenging for the Government of Afghanistan (GOA) to manage a functioning government. Lost tax revenues due to the drug economy makes funding rural development and other infrastructure improvement projects nearly impossible without international assistance. It is no wonder why in the eyes of many of Afghans, the GOA is largely ineffective and unresponsive to their needs. Both Afghans and the GOA are being victimized by the drug economy which perpetuates "the inability of the government to deliver services and exert influence throughout the country has eroded its institutional legitimacy."¹⁷

This institutional void is filled in many ways by the drug traffickers and insurgents who receive enormous amounts of income from the drug economy. They in turn use this income to further destabilize and undermine the Afghan government. The Taliban in particular, use profits to recruit and hire unemployed Afghans; and at \$20 a day, it is a deal many cannot refuse.¹⁸ Afghans are used as insurgent fighters, harvesters and protectors of opium for the Taliban. This cycle undermines the GOA, leads to increased regional instability, fuels the insurgency, and threatens the security of Afghanistan and the region.

In southern Afghanistan where opium poppy cultivation is among the highest in the country, the Taliban have successfully used poppy eradication efforts to create animosity and incite violence between local farmers and eradication forces. Other techniques to influence behavior are “night letters,” which threaten violence on the local population if they refuse to support the insurgents.¹⁹ Given little alternative, many farmers decide to side with the Taliban. Drug traffickers are also providing resources to the Taliban “in exchange for the protection of drug trade routes, opium poppy fields, and members of their organizations.”²⁰ Insurgents and criminal elements are both benefiting from what appears to be a growing symbiotic relationship.

Nevertheless, “not all violence is linked to transnational jihadis. Across Afghanistan, profit-driven criminality is more pervasive than sympathy for or cooperation with insurgents, even if both benefit from and contribute to general lawlessness.”²¹ In many ways what is motivating the population to fight can be attributed to a distinct gap in the services that the government provides and better economic alternatives. “The new insurgents are an assortment of ideologically motivated Afghan and foreign

militants, disillusioned tribal communities, foreign intelligence operatives, drug traffickers, militia commanders, disenchanted and unemployed youth, and self-interested spoilers.”²² The diverse backgrounds and varying motivational factors of the insurgents only begins to illustrate the complexity of the problem exacerbating the forces influencing the drug economy; change will require a long-term, multifaceted approach and assistance from neighboring countries.

Afghanistan’s drug economy has an equally negative effect on its bordering Central Asian countries. In particular, the porous borders it shares with Iran and Pakistan, make it an extremely permissive environment and one that is conducive for drug trafficking. Iran now has the highest rate of opiate abuse in the world, with approximately 2.8% of its population or 1.3 million people using the drug.²³ The UNODC recently concluded that poor economic development in several of the Central Asian states “appears to have contributed to the rising attraction of criminal activities over the last couple of years.”²⁴ To assist Afghanistan with their counternarcotics operations, several Central Asian and European countries have established initiatives to help them gain a better understanding of the depth of the problem, and for good reason. “Afghan opiates represented: almost 100% of the illicit opiates consumed in...Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Krgystan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and The Russian Federation.”²⁵

Afghanistan’s Drug Control Strategy: Goals, Priorities, and Challenges

In January 2006, Afghanistan’s Ministry of Counternarcotics published an updated version of their 2003 National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS). Although stating the next review of the NDCS would be completed in January 2007, the lack of its availability

indicates this work appears to be incomplete. The purpose of the NDCS is to provide the GOA a strategic framework and focus, apply its resources and help guide Afghanistan's counternarcotics policy. The United Kingdom has played an instrumental role in assisting the Ministry of Counter-Narcotics with developing this strategy. For the first time, the 2006 NDCS reflects the combined input and effort from numerous Afghanistan Ministerial participants, all of whom played a major role in developing the final product.²⁶ The United Kingdom continues playing a prominent role in assisting Afghanistan with the development and implementation of their counternarcotics policy and programs.

The updated strategy is designed to reduce the level of poppy cultivation while simultaneously targeting the drug traffickers, and reducing the overall market value of the opium. "It is only when we are able to successfully reduce cultivation, production and disrupt the trade that the total value of the opium economy will decrease, thereby indicating long-term success both in the fight against narcotics and in the transition towards a more secure and effectively governed Afghanistan."²⁷ The strategy also establishes that eradication of drugs will be done manually (cutting) and used primarily as a disincentive to grow illicit crops. In order to be successful, however, it also recognizes the criticality of it being accepted and supported at the provincial level and below.

The overarching policy goal of the NDCS concentrates on all aspects of the opium economy and is "to secure a sustainable decrease in cultivation, production, trafficking and consumption of illicit drugs with a view to complete and sustainable elimination."²⁸ By targeting the drug traffickers and reducing opium poppy cultivation, it is the goal of

the NDCS to significantly reduce the flow of illicit drugs into Central Asia and Europe, where approximately 80% of the heroin originates from Afghanistan.²⁹ The NDCS identifies several national priorities for achieving the policy's objective—a significant reduction in the production and trafficking of poppy—with the long-term goal of complete elimination. They are:

- Disrupting the drugs trade by targeting traffickers and their backers and eliminating the basis for the trade;
- Strengthening and diversifying legal rural livelihoods;
- Reducing the demand for illicit drug users; and
- Strengthening state institutions both at the center and in the provinces.³⁰

In addition to identifying these national priorities, the NDCS provides a detailed description on precisely how the strategy will initially reduce, and ultimately eliminate Afghanistan's reliance on the drug economy. It acknowledges the importance of concurrent efforts that should occur at multiple levels of the government for maximum effect. Focusing on the drug traffickers, providing legal alternatives, and building the capacity of the judicial infrastructure by rooting out corruption is all necessary for achieving progress. "Unless we focus activity in all these areas, while continuing to inject risk into the trafficking system through a credible enforcement and eradication threat, we will not make a sustainable impact..."³¹

Since 2005 several organizations have made this strategy a reality, though on a limited scale. Working together, the Afghan Special Narcotics Force (ASNF), Counternarcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA), and the Counternarcotics Criminal Justice Task Force (CJTF) have convicted over 150 traffickers.³² Taxing their efforts

are the millions of Afghans who are somehow involved in helping grow the drug economy as a farmer, trafficker, insurgent or government official. “U.S. officials and many observers believe that the introduction of a democratic system of government to Afghanistan has been accompanied by the election and appointment of narcotics-associated individuals to positions of public office.”³³ Sadly, many of these people become dependent on the drugs to provide them with more than just a source of revenue.

The NDCS also addresses an area of growing concern—addiction. Although the use of any drug as an intoxicant is strictly forbidden under Islamic law, opium, heroin, and hashish usage in Afghanistan is becoming increasingly common. “It is estimated that there are now more than 920,000 problem drug users (which includes opium, hashish, pharmaceuticals and alcohol) and in this basis, 3.8% of all Afghans consume illicit drugs.”³⁴ As the drug users’ addiction increases, so do their poverty and health-related issues (HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, etc.) for which there are inadequate treatment or medical facilities to provide assistance. The NDCS recognizes the importance of increasing both the quality and accessibility to regional treatment facilities, capable of treating current users and providing drug awareness education to prevent future use and addiction.

With the focus of the NDCS clearly on the long-term, the goals and priorities associated with implementing it may take an even longer to achieve due to many challenges:

- Building sustainable institutions to support and strengthen the counternarcotics strategy;

- Strengthening the rule of law by reforming judicial institutions;
- No sustainable reduction in cultivation will occur until rural development is sufficient enough to support legal livelihoods; and
- Conducting counternarcotics actions simultaneously, at all levels of government.³⁵

“Together or individually, these factors may impede the Government’s counternarcotics policies.”³⁶ The NDCS relies heavily on the Provincial Governors’ acceptance, and more importantly willingness, to support the strategy. Without their full support, Afghanistan will undoubtedly remain a country that is being victimized by an addiction to drugs and the lure of short-term profit, and may never achieve the purpose of the NDCS—Afghanistan’s “full re-integration into the community of nations.”

U.S. Counternarcotics Strategy: Obstacles and Lessons Learned

A year and a half after Afghanistan’s Ministry of Counternarcotics updated their NDCS, the U.S. Coordinator for Counternarcotics and Justice Reform, Ambassador Thomas Schweich, released an updated U.S. counternarcotics strategy for Afghanistan. The U.S. “Five Pillar Plan” focuses resources and effort on specific areas contained within the Afghan national priorities identified in their NDCS. In addition to codifying the U.S. strategy, it also “examines issues, obstacles, and lessons learned, and presents a way forward on key elements of the strategy, including public information, alternative development, poppy elimination/eradication, interdiction, and justice reform.”³⁷

The revised strategy is the product of an interagency effort and includes contributions from the Department of State (DOS), Department of Defense (DOD), Department of the Treasury, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the

Department of Justice (DOJ), the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Since 2001, the USG has invested approximately \$1.6 billion into supporting Afghanistan's counternarcotics strategy.³⁸ The ONDCP establishes the overall U.S. counternarcotics policy and the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs from the Department of State assumes the role of lead U.S. implementation agency.

"The USG strategy focuses on helping the GOA disrupt Afghanistan's opium-based economy and strengthen the central government's control over the country."³⁹

The collective efforts of the interagency to achieve these goals, are divided as described below:

- DOS – works to improve public information engagement and education, improve Afghan elimination and eradication capacity, and improve police training programs;
- DOD – provides equipment, airlift, heavy arms support, salary support for most Afghan law enforcement;
- DEA – helps the GOA target the command and control structures of major drug traffickers, and stop the flow of drugs in and out of Afghanistan;
- DOD/DOS/DOJ/DEA – works to build the capacity of the counternarcotics police, border management forces, and the Afghan court system; and
- USAID – works to establish legitimate economic alternatives to opium poppy cultivation.⁴⁰

What follows is a detailed review of how these agencies are working to achieve the goals listed above, and in doing so, support the key elements of the U.S. "Five Pillar

Plan.” This comprehensive strategy focuses on: public information, alternative development, opium poppy elimination/eradication, interdiction, and justice reform.

The USG’s public information campaign is closely coordinated with the GOA and designed to increase the Afghan populace’s confidence by informing them of the positive actions the government is taking, to improve their quality of life. It is also intended to raise public awareness of “the threat of narcotics and danger of participation in the illegal drug trade.”⁴¹ This is being accomplished through local leaders and other face to face engagements at the provincial level. Engagement at local and provincial level have proved to be more effective, especially when discussing controversial issues like poppy eradication. Unfortunately, it is also being done more frequently in response to disinformation being circulated by elements of the insurgency.⁴²

Providing economic alternatives to cultivating opium poppy is a vexing problem of enormous magnitude. Economically, there is no alternative crop that provides farmers with the comparable income to what opium poppy generates. The USG has focused on this challenge by allocating up to \$150 million annually for “short-term cash-for-work projects, comprehensive agricultural and business development projects, and high-visibility programs.”⁴³ These efforts are applied in the areas where opium poppy production rates are the highest. The Good Performers Initiative rewards provincial leaders by providing “both short and long-term economic incentives” and political support to provinces that reduce their dependency on opium. The challenge with most economic alternatives is that it takes time to see the benefits, making them less desirable alternatives for many Afghans.

Supporting the efforts of the GOA to reduce the population's dependency on opium poppy is the objective in the third element of the U.S. "Five Pillar Plan." Although the USG is encouraging the GOA to consider herbicides to assist with eradication efforts, the two primary methods currently used are mechanized (tractor or all terrain vehicle) and manual. To support the policy of non-negotiated forced eradication, the USG helped establish the Afghan Eradication Force (AEF), an organization of approximately 600 who are trained in eradication operations.⁴⁴ Another component of the USG strategy is "public recognition and reward for governors who have excelled in suppressing poppy planting." This technique has proven very effective encouraging other governors to reduce levels of opium poppy.⁴⁵

When efforts to reduce the amount of opium poppy being cultivated are unsuccessful, the USG assists the GOA in a number of ways including: use of the DEA to interdict "large-scale traffickers moving drug and money shipments over the northern border of Afghanistan and into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan," training assistance for Afghan counternarcotics units, and partnering in Afghan-led counternarcotics operations.⁴⁶ "Over the past two years, interdiction initiatives have resulted in the seizure of more than 26 metric tons of heroin, the initiation of hundreds of investigations, and the arrest of more than 1,000 individuals."⁴⁷

The final element of the USG strategy is to assist the GOA in reforming its judicial infrastructure. It is here that the DOJ and USAID work to implement the USG strategy of "building the central justice system; expanding to the provinces; and increasing coordinated international justice assistance."⁴⁸ Ultimately, the long-term goal is to both improve the Afghan justice system through reform, and increase the population's

confidence in the Afghan criminal justice system. Several USG initiated judicial reform efforts have significantly improved the Afghan governments' ability to "enforce counternarcotics laws and prosecute prominent individuals involved in narcotics trafficking."⁴⁹ However, severely limited by widespread corruption, unqualified personnel, and minimal infrastructure, the justice sector will take many years to rebuild to a point of legitimacy.

The Way Ahead: Investing Now For a Safer Future

Among the large body of scholarly work analyzing Afghanistan's addiction to drugs there is general agreement that there are no simple short-term solutions. Most experts still disagree on how to solve the problem. Much like the U.S. experience in Columbia, it will likely take decades to rid the land of the scourge being caused by illegal drugs. The U.S. strategy is sound and fully supports the NDCS, but obstacles for implementation remain. Although both strategies promote the need for a comprehensive, multifaceted approach, putting the strategies into practice remains a significant challenge.

Despite all of the U.S. efforts and the instruments of national power being applied to suppress Afghanistan's drug economy, the amount of opium produced increased from 6,100 tons in 2006 to 8,200 tons in 2007.⁵⁰ This increase calls into question the overall effectiveness of the U.S. counternarcotics strategy, which was recently criticized by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates.⁵¹ There have been a growing number of proponents who advocate legalizing the cultivation of opium poppy for medicinal purposes. Supporters argue that the current counternarcotics strategy is not working, and offer this notion as a possible alternative to be used in conjunction with other

measures. “According to the International Narcotics Control Board whose mandate is to ensure an adequate supply of morphine for medical and scientific purposes, 80 percent of the world’s population, including Afghans, faces an acute shortage of essential morphine medicines.”⁵² This revealing statistic indicates that legalizing the cultivation of opium poppy, on a limited scale, could become a viable option for reducing Afghanistan’s dependency on the illegal drug economy.

Based on U.S. experiences in Afghanistan the “Five Pillar Plan” identifies several additional emphasis areas that could also improve the effectiveness of the U.S. counternarcotics strategy. These include:

- Dramatically increasing development assistance to incentivize licit development while simultaneously amplifying the scope and intensity of both interdiction and eradication operations;
- Coordinating counternarcotics and counterinsurgency planning and operations in a manner not previously accomplished, with a particular emphasis on integrating drug interdiction into the counterinsurgency mission; and
- Encouraging consistent, sustained political will for the counternarcotics effort among the Afghan government, our allies, and international civilian and military organizations.⁵³

These efforts will most likely continue to challenge the USG in the foreseeable future. The stakes are high—transforming Afghanistan’s National Drug Control Strategy and the “Five Pillar Plan” counternarcotics strategies into realities, will benefit not only Afghanistan, but Central Asian and European countries as well. “Nations that

vigorously and persistently confront drug traffickers and their dirty money stand to reclaim legitimate, democratic authority.”⁵⁴ To accomplish this and assist in reducing Afghanistan’s reliance on the drug economy, the following additional recommendations are offered to improve effectiveness of the strategies:

- Corruption and nepotism must be uprooted and extracted from all levels of the government. This includes the acceptance of bribery as almost a social norm and enables drug traffickers to conduct their operations;⁵⁵
- The GOA must improve its ability to deliver basic social services by investing in both infrastructure and education. This will require significant amounts of international assistance for construction projects;
- Incentives and disincentives must be applied impartially in the provinces and districts that are correspondingly reducing or increasing their levels of poppy cultivation;
- Afghans must unite and work together to defeat the insurgency and complete Afghanistan’s “full reintegration into the community of nations,” before the international community becomes fatigued at trying; and
- Eradication operations must be grass roots lead, by provincial and district leaders. Providing alternative livelihood programs before forcibly eradicating illicit crops is essential for any sustained effect; and
- The United Nations must persuade the international community to work together and remain committed in providing the long-term assistance that Afghanistan needs by continuing to invest now, for a safer future. This investment includes committing additional security forces to Afghanistan to

enforce the rule of law, until which time the GOA can adequately provide for their own security. These forces should be capable of assisting the GOA with drug interdiction operations.

Perhaps the authors of the Afghanistan Study Group Report said it best, “Counter-narcotics done properly will remove criminal power holders and bring security and development. Done the wrong way, counter-narcotics could destroy any hope for popular support.”⁵⁶ The fight for Afghanistan’s future is really a fight for democracy that is under attack by an insurgency which is receiving the majority of its funding from illicit drugs. Time is running out, which means the time to reverse the current trends of increased illicit drug cultivation and trafficking—is now. The aforementioned recommendations offer the best hope for successful counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan. Implementation will continue to build on the successes that have been achieved, and over time, help detoxify the country of Afghanistan and sever its ties to the insurgency.

Endnotes

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